

Every morning the blanket of dust enlarges over the valley going to Mertzon from the ranch. Oilmen and their dual-wheeled freighters keep up a thick, white haze of caliche powder that extends 20 miles long and two to three miles wide up the canyon - a dry layer that chokes and stifles the countryside.

Ranchbound herders and school buses pick their way through the dense smog of floating dirt. By winter without a rain the county lanes are going to be beat down into rock beds that'll make the roads in old Mexico look as smooth as ski runs.

Seven oil companies cross one of our pastures for a mile. Huge transports and company cars drive through at 60 miles an hour, hurling volleys of dirt on the land. Beer cans and coke bottles are tossed along the way; everything from oily rags to ragged pieces of two inch cable are discarded on the sides.

In July, we are forced to move the sheep from the pasture. Lots of the woolies were turning up with limber necks from watching the cars speed by. The whole herd was half crazy from running for safety at the cross trails. It was six weeks before they settled down.

The heavy traffic didn't bother the cattle. What got them were the sporadic passing of pickups. Every time one passed, they'd stop grazing to examine the vehicle for a feed box or a sack. Day after day of that counted off in a big way.

Strange, as much trash as was thrown by the road, we didn't have one case of hardware disease disappear. The charge that cattle eat oilfield waste has been exaggerated in my opinion. I've learned in the last 30 years of ranching in a dry hole boom that an old cow is more selective about the junk she eats than we think she is. For instance, we don't eat pipe couplings larger than four inches in diameter. They'll lick around on a big coupling until they make themselves sick, but anyone with a bit of cow knowledge knows that as long as an old cow has plenty of wire mesh, oil filters or rubber gaskets, they won't eat the big stuff.

I do a lot of joshing with the oilmen about salt water spills and oil seeps and trash piles. The fossil fuel miners are good sports. Sometimes, for fun, I mention the sheriff or the district court room. The ones at the ranch don't seem to take my scolding seriously, as they make themselves right at home.

Biggest disagreements we've had were over the title to the sovereignty of the land. Getting out in the country gives folks a feeling of freedom. Property rights are hard to keep on man's mind with oil selling so high and with it being so deep under the ground.

Over in San Angelo, store owners call the police when their property is threatened. I don't know of a city anywhere that'd tolerate seven oil companies destroying their streets and jeopardizing the citizens' livelihood. But city ordinances I suppose are different. I guess it serves me right for having leased the land for oil and gas exploration.

Times and attitude are changing in the Shortgrass Country. Ranchers have been hiring some right handy sorts of lawyers to defend their land. Takes a pretty tough fixer to do the job, but I hear it's paying off.

The dust is worse each day. I sure miss the privacy of the old days. You ought to see that road at peak times.